



Taken by teej.318

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Family, Friendship

Language: English

Characters: Mike W., OC, Will B.

Status: Completed

Published: 2019-04-01 13:26:02

Updated: 2019-06-21 21:42:35

Packaged: 2019-12-12 18:35:54

Rating: T

Chapters: 10

Words: 21,391

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Moving on from the events of Guilt, Chris Byers adjusts to his new life with his cousins Will and Jonathan and his aunt Joyce. But things are never easy for the Byers family.

1. Confrontation

Jan. 4, 1985

Chris nervously checked his backpack one more time. He couldn't help himself, even though nothing would change since he last checked it five minutes earlier. Once he was finally convinced he had everything he needed for the day, he stood up, picked up the backpack and walked out of his and Will's room.

He walked into the kitchen, setting his backpack next to Will's on the counter before he joined Will at the dining table. As soon as Chris sat down, Jonathan hurried over and loaded the plate sitting in front of Chris with eggs and bacon.

"Thanks," Chris said quietly, giving Jonathan a smile.

"Of course, buddy," replied Jonathan as he carried the pot back over to the stove to cook his own food. "You gotta have a full stomach for your first day of school!"

"Yes, you do!" said Joyce as she walked into the kitchen, straightening her outfit. She grabbed an apple from the counter and took a bite out of it before she walked over to the table. She swallowed quickly so she could talk to Chris and Will.

"How are you feeling, honey?" she asked Chris, the concern evident in her voice.

"A little nervous, but I'll be all right," Chris replied.

"Well the good news is you have most of your classes with Will, so you won't be alone all day," Joyce said kindly as she patted Chris on the head. She turned to Will. "You make sure Chris has everything he needs today, OK?"

"I will, Mom," said Will, surprisingly not sounding annoyed that he was being told to do this for probably the hundredth time. "We're gonna stick together in our classes and we'll hang out with everybody else at lunch."

"Good. Being a new student at school isn't easy, so I want to make sure you're comfortable all day, Chris."

"I'll be fine, Aunt Joyce, promise," Chris said, giving Joyce a smile, which seemed to act as a calming agent for her.

"OK, but you let me know if anyone bothers you at school, you hear?"

"I will, Aunt Joyce, but you don't have to worry about me. I'll be OK, I promise."

"All right then, I'll shut up about it," Joyce said, giving both the boys a kiss on the head. "I'd better get going," she added, walking over to Jonathan and kissing him on the cheek. "You boys have a good day at school. I'll see you all tonight for dinner."

Once Joyce had walked out of the house and Jonathan continued cooking his own breakfast, Chris and Will continued eating quietly until Chris perked up, looking amused.

"What?" Will asked.

"Does your Mom forget that aside from my way with words that gets me out of any given situation, I'm also a black belt?"

Will grinned at him.

"Probably," he said. "But even if she did remember, do you think she'd stop worrying about you all day?"

"Fair point," said Chris, chuckling.

By the end of the day, Chris felt as if he would settle in nicely to Hawkins Middle School. During the two classes he didn't have with Will — photography and creative writing — he had already made some new friends who shared his interests. After their last class of the day — algebra — Chris and Will walked toward their lockers together.

"Well, how was it?" Will asked expectantly.

"It was fine, Aunt Joyce," Chris replied sarcastically, causing Will to giggle. "No, but seriously, it's been a good day, I think I'll fit in here just fine."

"That's great!" Will exclaimed as they reached their lockers and opened them. "How are you feeling about that quiz we're gonna take in algebra on Friday, though?"

"Well, we didn't have quizzes like that back at my old school, but hopefully I can quickly learn everything and get it stored in my brain before Friday, otherwise I'll be screwed!"

The boys laughed as Mike, Dustin and Lucas walked up to them, their backpacks on their backs.

"You guys ready?" Mike asked when he reached them.

"Yeah, we're coming," Will said, shutting his locker. "That is, if Chris doesn't forget his English notebook."

"*Funny*," Chris said sarcastically. "It's been in my backpack all day, it'd be next to impossible to forget."

"Yeah, but you're special," Will laughed.

"Oh, shove off," Chris replied, smiling in spite of his comment as he closed his locker.

"So, anyway," said Mike, grinning at the both of them. "Let's get on out of here."

"Yeah, we're gonna meet Max over by the door by our bikes," Lucas said excitedly. "We don't want to keep her waiting."

Dustin mimed vomiting when Lucas said that. Lucas punched him on the arm, but Chris caught Dustin's eye and gave him a smile. The boys all started to walk down the hallway, heading toward the east exit.

"How you like Hawkins Middle so far, Chris?" Dustin asked.

"So far so good," said Chris. "Met a couple of people in photography

and creative writing who seem pretty cool. And the classes don't seem too hard, yet."

"Well at least you didn't see have to see Troy or James," said Lucas. "Those assholes didn't seem to want to show themselves at all today."

"What did you say, Sinclair?" demanded a voice from behind them.

The boys came to a halt in the hallway. They turned around slowly to face the source of the voice and came face-to-face with Troy and James, both of whom looked rather angry.

"Shit, you spoke too soon, Lucas," Dustin muttered.

"Shut up!" Troy demanded. Dustin closed his mouth, looking worried.

"Stay calm," Chris whispered, barely moving his lips.

"Who the fuck are you? Another faggot?" Troy asked, looking at Chris with an angry face.

Chris simply stared back at Troy with a blank expression on his face. He took a couple of breaths to make sure he was centered, but would not give Troy the satisfaction of an answer.

"What, too stupid to answer?"

"You know, he kinda looks like Byers," James observed. "Maybe they're related. What happened, Byers, did you find your long-lost brother or something?"

"He's my cousin," Will whispered, grabbing onto Chris' arm because of his nerves. Chris patted Will's hand to reassure him, but didn't take his eyes off of Troy and James.

"So you're Chris Byers!" Troy said triumphantly. "I knew there was some connection to Byers! So, you're an orphan now, huh, Chris Byers?"

Chris glared back at Troy, but didn't answer him. Troy looked amused.

"What, too afraid to talk about your dead parents, Chris Byers? Come on, tell me about Mommy and Daddy!"

The rest of the party looked at Chris nervously, but his expression hadn't changed. Even James looked uncomfortable with Troy's taunting. Finally, Chris spoke in a calm, collected tone.

"Ah, trying the old 'pick on the new kid' routine, eh Troy?" he said. "Too bad you come unprepared for such a conversation. I could outwit you in a second, kiddo, so why don't you give up now and just let us leave?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Troy demanded.

"And you've just proved my point," Chris replied, smiling. "If you couldn't even keep up in that conversation, you certainly couldn't keep up with me in an actual conversation, so if there's nothing else we can help you with, we'll be on our way."

Chris turned with the rest of the boys, who were all beaming at him. They walked a few steps before Mike lurched backward as Troy grabbed him from behind, pulling him away from the boys.

"Mike!" Dustin exclaimed.

"Stay the hell back!" Troy ordered as he wrapped an arm around Mike's throat. Mike struggled to breathe against Troy.

"Chris, do something!" Lucas shouted.

"You can't do anything, Chris Byers!" Troy retorted.

Chris calmly shrugged his backpack off his shoulder and dropped it on the ground. He took a step forward before Will grabbed onto his arm, stopping him.

"No, don't!" Will whispered. "I don't want you to get hurt!"

"I'll be fine, Will," Chris said, patting Will gently on the arm. He looked directly in Will's eyes and Will finally nodded, letting go of Chris.

Chris turned to Troy and started to approach him.

"Let him go," he said simply.

"Yeah, maybe he's right, Troy, you should just let him go," James said nervously. Troy turned to him, scowling, and used a hand to smack him across the face. James fell to the ground with a grunt.

"I said *let him go*," Chris said with a snarl.

Troy's facial expression didn't change as he heard Chris' tone become angry.

"Beat it, Fag Lover, or you're next," he taunted.

Chris' eyes narrowed before he lunged forward and grabbed Troy's shoulder and back. Troy stumbled and released Mike as Chris pushed him. Mike scrambled to his feet and ran back over to Will, Dustin and Lucas. Will pulled Mike into a hug as they watched what happened next.

Once he had regained his balance, Troy raised his fists. Chris stood in front of him calmly, waiting. Suddenly, Troy leaned forward to punch him and Chris stepped aside. Troy's punch landed on the lockers behind Chris. Troy screamed out in pain and looked at his fist, which had turned purple; he had broken his hand. The two lockers he hit had dented slightly.

Meanwhile, Chris had calmly walked around Troy to stand in front of another set of lockers. Troy shook off the pain and faced Chris again, ready to hit him with his undamaged hand. He let out a scream as he lunged to punch Chris, but Chris stepped aside again and Troy punched two more lockers, hurting his second hand.

Troy's eyes widened as he stared at his second hand, which had already started swelling. Before he could do anything else, Chris grabbed his right shoulder and forced Troy to the ground on his knees. With his left hand holding Troy's hair roughly, Chris raised his right hand, which curled into a fist. Troy stared at him with a frightened expression on his face.

"Mercy is for the weak," Chris said in a tone barely louder than a

whisper. "I do not train to be merciful. A man who faces me is an enemy. An enemy deserves no mercy."

With that, Chris let out a scream that sounded like a battle cry. Troy shut his eyes tightly when he saw Chris' hand move toward his face. Just before his fist reached Troy's face, Chris stopped his scream and his hand, which he opened as if he were gonna karate chop Troy's face. Troy opened his eyes and stared at Chris' hand, waiting.

Chris grinned and turned his hand, giving Troy a hard squeeze on the nose.

"Honk," he said in a childish tone.

Troy's eyes rolled into his head as Chris let him go and he collapsed onto the ground. Chris turned around and looked at Will, Mike, Dustin and Lucas. They were all staring at him, looking shocked and somewhat amused. Chris smiled at them and gave them a wink before he hurried to them and picked up his backpack again.

"You all right?" Chris asked, looking at Mike with concern in his eyes.

Mike nodded at him.

"Yeah," he said looking at Chris with a bemused expression. "Thanks, Chris."

"Don't mention it," Chris said as he turned to Will and pulled him into a hug. Will held him tightly before they broke apart.

"Jesus, Chris, don't ever scare me like that again," Will demanded, giving Chris a smile despite still feeling terrified.

"Oh, that was nothing, Will," Chris replied with a chuckle. "Troy simply underestimated me. He won't try that again."

"How do you know?" asked Lucas.

"Look around," Chris said. "A good chunk of the student body saw me humiliate Troy. You seriously think he's gonna try and mess with us again after that?"

The boys all shook their heads as they kept walking down the hallway, the east exit just a few feet away.

"God damn, Chris, you kick some ass!" Dustin exclaimed as they reached the exit. "You're crazy enough to be on El's level!"

2. Care

Feb. 5, 1985

Chris and Will sat together on the couch, watching *Star Wars* on TV. They were huddled together underneath a blanket; the temperature outside had been dropping all evening and it had started snowing about two hours earlier. It didn't look like the snow storm was gonna let up any time soon.

Just as the Death Star destroyed Alderaan in the movie, the program went to commercial and a news bulletin broke into the coverage.

"*This is a special Hawkins weather alert*," said a robotic sounding voice. Chris and Will glanced at each other, grinning, before the weatherman for their local station appeared on screen, standing in front of a rader.

"Good evening, Hawkins," he said. "Well, this winter storm won't let up until the early morning hours. We will see several inches of snow and icy roads, making conditions hazardous for all. And we have just received word that all Hawkins schools will be closed tomorrow due to the weather."

At that, Chris and Will stopped listening and instead cheered loudly. It was enough for Joyce to come running into the living room, looking haphazard as her hair was halfway into being pulled out of a ponytail.

"What is it, boys?" Joyce demanded.

"It's nothing, Mom," Will said, laughing. "School's just been canceled for tomorrow."

"Oh," said Joyce, starting to look embarrassed. "I thought something else was going on..."

"Is that a new look, Aunt Joyce?" Chris asked in a mischievous voice. "I must say, it's starting to grow on me."

"Oh, very funny, Chris," Joyce said, walking over to the couch and

ruffling Chris' hair. "How do you like somebody messing up your hair?"

"Hey, now, in my defense, I didn't actually mess up your hair, you just heard us laughing and reacted."

"Fine, you win this round," Joyce said reluctantly, but she was still smiling. "Now, listen, I don't want you boys staying up too late, even with a snow day tomorrow. There's no guarantee you'll have another one and I don't want you two messing up your sleeping schedule."

"All right, Mom," Will said. "We'll go to bed as soon as the movie is over."

"Okay, honey," Joyce said, giving Will a kiss on the head. "And you too, Chris."

"Yeah, yeah," Chris said as Joyce kissed him on the head. "Good night, Aunt Joyce."

"Good night, boys. Call me at work if you need anything tomorrow."

"I think we can survive one day snowed in," said Chris. "If anything, the day will run smoothly since I'm the oldest, which makes me in charge!"

Joyce laughed as she disappeared into her bedroom. Chris turned to look at Will, who was looking at him with daggers in his eyes, even though he was smiling.

"You're only four days older than me!" Will exclaimed.

Chris shrugged. "Still older, so I'm in charge," he said, grinning at Will.

"Yeah, well I've lived here longer."

"Fair point," said Chris. "Too bad Jonathan is out of town on that photo trip cause then he could spare us the trouble of figuring out who's in charge."

"Very funny," said Will.

"Only joking, cousin."

Chris woke with a start. He adjusted his eyes to the light coming in through the window. He sat up slowly, stretching and glanced around to look at his clock. It was 7:48.

"So much for sleeping in," he muttered to himself as he yawned. He glanced over at Will's bed. "You up, Will?"

"Yeah," Will said in a hoarse voice.

Hearing Will's voice seemed to have woken up Chris faster than anything else. Will sounded like he was sick. Chris stood up and strode over to Will's bed. Will had wrapped his blankets around him and he looked white in the face.

"Are you okay?" Chris asked.

Will shook his head.

"I'm freezing and I'm sweaty and my throat hurts."

"Oh no," Chris muttered. He stuck his hand out and put it on Will's forehead. Instantly, he could tell Will had a fever. "You're burning up, Will. I'll go get you a warm bath drawn up and I'll call your Mom."

"Chris, she doesn't need to worry..."

"It's all right, I'll make sure she doesn't. I'll let her know that I'll stay here all day with you and I'll do what I can to make sure you start feeling better."

With that, Chris dashed out of the bedroom and into the living room, picking up the phone and dialing Joyce's work number. Predictably, Joyce was worried about Will and was insisting that she come home to care for him.

"Don't you worry about it, Aunt Joyce. I'm here and I'll take care of him, I promise. I'm gonna draw a warm bath for him and I'll make sure he stays on bed rest all day today."

"But what if you get sick, too, Chris?" Joyce moaned.

"I'll take my chances. Listen, you don't have to worry. I'll take care of him, Aunt Joyce. If anything, it'll give me something to do on our day off today."

"All right, Chris. Thank you, honey. You call me if his condition changes at all, okay?"

"The second it does, I'll call you. I love you."

"I love you, too, sweetie. And thanks again for taking care of him."

"Oh, it's nothing."

Chris hung up the phone and hurried into the bathroom, turning on the water and getting a bath ready for Will. He made sure the temperature was nice and warm, but not so much that it was scald Will as soon as he walked in. He also got a towel ready for when Will was done. When the bath was full, Chris shut off the water and returned to his and Will's room.

"Your Mom knows, but I made sure she doesn't worry," Chris said. "The bath is ready for you."

"Thanks," Will said quietly as he sat up. Chris bent down to help him stand up.

Chris led Will to the bathroom and only left his side once he was standing next to the tub.

"Holler if you need me, Will," he said as he shut the bathroom door, leaving a tiny crack open so he could hear Will.

Half an hour later, Chris had changed into a sweater and jeans to keep himself warm as Will finished in the bathroom. He came back into the room with a towel wrapped around.

"I set out some clothes for you to wear," Chris said. "These should keep you warm. Get yourself dressed and I'll get the couch ready for you. You're gonna need bed rest all day."

"Chris, you don't have to do all this for me," Will said, but Chris cut him off.

"Don't worry about it, Will, I want to. I promise."

"All right," Will said, though he still sounded reluctant. "Can you give me a second to get ready?"

"Take your time," Chris said, standing up and leaving the room. "Come out when you're dressed and I'll have the couch ready for you."

About ten minutes later, Will walked into the living room, dressed in the sweatshirt and sweatpants Chris had laid out for him. Chris smiled at Will and showed off the couch, which he had put two comforters on, one for Will to lay on and the other to keep Will nice and toasty.

"We're gonna make sure you stay nice and warm today, Will," Chris said as Will lay down on the couch. "And I don't want to hear any protests about me wasting my snow day to care for you. You hear?"

Will grinned.

"Yeah," he said.

"Hey, your voice is already sounding a bit better," Chris said as he tucked the comforter around Will. Once Will was snuggled in, Chris felt Will's forehead again.

"Still pretty warm, but not as bad as before," he noted. "I'll check again around lunchtime."

For the rest of the morning, Chris sat with Will on the couch, refusing to leave his side, no matter the risk to himself. Chris wrapped himself in a blanket to keep warm, despite the heater being on in the house. They watched whatever Will wanted to on TV and stayed together until Chris stomach started to rumble around 11.

"I'm starting to get hungry, how about you?" Chris asked.

"Yeah, I could go for something," Will replied.

"I'll get us some soup made and maybe some grilled cheese to go with it," Chris said. "There's no better meal than that when you're sick. And it's the best meal for when it's cold outside, so win/win."

"Thanks, Chris," Will said quietly.

"No worries," Chris said as he walked into the kitchen and started looking around for cans of soup. About half an hour later, he had two bowls of soup ready along with four grilled cheese sandwiches, made with pepper jack cheese at Will's request. When he was done, Chris carried the plates into the living room and set them down on the coffee table before doing the same with the bowls of soup. He helped Will set up and together they ate their lunch.

"This is amazing, Chris, thank you," Will said when he was halfway done.

Chris smiled at him.

"Of course, buddy. Like I said, it's the best meal to have when you're sick and when it's cold out, so when both are happening, it only makes sense to have it."

Soon, they had finished their lunch. Will laid back down on the couch while Chris handled clean up. When he was done, Chris felt Will's forehead again.

"Hey, it feels like your fever is going down," Chris said. "That's a good thing. Looks like your body is doing what it can to get over this cold as quickly as possible. Anyway, what would you like to watch now?"

"Can we watch *Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*?" Will asked, sounding hopeful. "I mean, we just watched the first movie last night and it doesn't feel right having a snow day without watching the other two."

"Yeah, we can watch them, Will," Chris said, standing up to fetch the VHS copies from the shelf.

By the time both movies were over, it was nearing 4:30, which meant

that Joyce would be home from work soon, depending on how bad the roads had gotten with the ice. Chris had dozed off midway through *Return of the Jedi* but woke up in time for the battle on Endor and the duel on the Death Star, but was feeling a little woozy from the nap and sudden wake up. He made him and Will some tea to help with it and felt better after downing it. When the movie ended, Chris turned to Will.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Much, much better, thank you," Will said in his normal tone of voice.

"You sure sound better," Chris said, standing up to feel Will's forehead again. "And you don't feel like you've got a fever anymore. I think all this rest has paid off for you, Will."

"Hey Chris, can I ask you something?"

"Course," Chris replied, sitting back down.

"Um...why did you spend all day taking care of me? I mean, I'm totally thankful that you did, I just wonder why you didn't just leave me here alone and go play in the snow or something."

"Well, first of all, I'm not actually a big fan of snow," Chris said. "It's nice and beautiful at first and then it halfway melts and gets everywhere and it's just gross. Aside from that, it's my job to take care of you, Will. I know Mike normally would, but since he wasn't here, I felt like I needed to do it. Besides, Druids in DND believe in healing naturally, don't they? After all, I didn't make you take any medicine today and you seem to be doing just fine to me!"

"Yeah, I am, thank you, Chris."

"And uh..." Chris started to say before breaking off, sounding nervous.

"What is it?"

"I just...I thought that after what happened last fall with the Mindflayer and all that that having a cold would bring back memories of everything that happened and I didn't want you to go

through that alone."

"Oh, Chris," Will said, setting up and taking the comforter off so he could crawl over and sit next to Chris. Will put a hand on Chris' shoulder. "Thank you for being so considerate. You were right, I did think about that a little bit today, especially this morning. But as soon as I knew you were here and taking care of me, I knew I was safe."

"Thank god," Chris said as he pulled Will into a hug. "I didn't want you to have to go through that by yourself, Will. That's why I didn't leave your side."

"Thank you," Will said. "I love you, Chris."

"I love you, too, Will. I'm always gonna be here, you know?"

"Yeah, I know," Will said, smiling.

3. Birthday Surprise

March 22, 1985

Chris set down the pancakes on the dining table. While Chris had worked on his famous pancakes, Jonathan had made the rest of the course: bacon, eggs and toast. Joyce had also gotten up early to help them prepare the meal. Finally, with just minutes to spare before Will's alarm would go off, everything was ready.

"That's everything," Chris said, looking down at the table happily as he stifled a yawn. "I'll go and get him."

"We'll be right here, honey," Joyce said, giving him a smile.

Chris grinned at her and turned to walk into his and Will's room. Will was sleeping peacefully. It seemed almost a crime to wake his cousin from his slumber, but he knew that seeing Will's face when he saw the breakfast they had made for him would make it worth it. Finally, Chris practically pounced on Will's bed.

"Get up!" he yelled. Will woke with a start, jumping up slightly in his bed, looking shocked.

"What is it?" Will asked in a worried tone of voice.

"It's your birthday! Get up!" Chris shouted.

Will grinned as he sat up in bed, tossing the blanket off of him.

"I don't remember asking for a wake-up call, Chris," Will said.

"Well, you might think differently when you see what we've got ready for you out in the kitchen!" Chris exclaimed, jumping up from Will's bed and grabbing Will's arm. "Come on, let's go!"

"All right, all right, you know you seem more excited about my birthday when yours was four days ago."

"Yeah, but we're celebrating both our birthdays tonight, so of course I'm excited! Now, come on!"

Chris pulled Will by the arm and led him into the kitchen. Joyce and Jonathan jumped up from their seats on the table when they saw Will.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" they shouted with Chris. Will grinned sheepishly at all of them as he sat down and took a look at his plate, which had all of the food they had prepared set on it; the bacon and eggs had been set on the pancake to give the pancake a somewhat frightening looking face, but Will appreciated the humor nonetheless.

"Thank you," he said happily. "This looks wonderful." He turned to Chris. "Please tell me these are your famous pancakes."

"Course," Chris replied as he sat down next to Will and picked up his fork and knife to enjoy his pancakes as well. "I only make them on special occasions and this certainly qualifies as such."

"Now, listen boys, I've gotta get going to work, but I'm getting off early so we can celebrate both birthdays tonight," said Joyce as she took a bite of bacon. "I've got a big dinner planned, so I don't want you boys doing too much after school with your friends, okay? Just be home by six and we'll have a good time tonight!"

Dinner had been a lovely affair. Joyce had whipped up pasta and lasagna, which were both Chris and Will's favorite things to eat, respectively. They had also enjoyed two cakes for each of the boys as well as some ice cream. Once their stomachs were full, Joyce gathered everyone in the living room to open gifts.

Chris and Will both received a handful of gifts apiece, including books and movies that each of them would enjoy. When they were done, Joyce nodded at Jonathan.

"Now, there's one more gift, but this one is for both of you," she said as Jonathan walked into the living room and picked up an envelope.

"For both of us?" Will asked. "Is it something we both want?"

"Something like that," Joyce replied coyly as Jonathan walked back into the living room and handed the envelope to Joyce.

"Yeah, you guys are both gonna love it," he said, smiling at his brother and cousin.

"Though truth be told, it's more of a gift from all of us to Chris, but it's a surprise for both of you," added Joyce as she handed Chris the envelope.

Chris took the envelope and looked at Will, who looked just as confused as he did. They both shrugged as Chris opened the top of the envelope. Several pieces of paper in it were stapled together. He took a look at the top of the front page with Will and the two of them nearly fainted when they read it.

SUPERIOR COURT FOR THE STATE OF INDIANA

IN AND FOR THE COUNTY OF ROANE

In the matter of the adoption

Petition of

Joyce A. Byers

Adopting parent

and

Chris W. Byers,

Adoptee

All the boys had to read was the top of the front page for it to sink in: Joyce wanted to adopt Chris. Both of the boys looked up at Joyce simultaneously; she was smiling, one of the happiest smiles either of them had ever seen on her.

"Does..." Chris said, trying to fight back the tears. "Does this mean what I think it does?"

Joyce's smiled widened, if that were possible.

"Yes, Chris," she said as she sat down on the couch and wrapped her

arms around him. "I'd like to adopt you, to make you an official member of our family."

Chris started to cry and Joyce did, too. Jonathan joined their hug right before Will did. Together, the four of them cried happily, their arms wrapped tightly around one another. Finally, they broke apart.

"Is this something you want, Chris?" Joyce asked. "I want to make sure that if I do adopt you, that it's something you want."

Chris looked from Joyce to Jonathan, who smiled at him and finally to Will. The two cousins locked eyes and in that moment, they understood each other fully. Will grabbed one of Chris' hands and held onto it, nodding at him. Chris nodded back at him before turning to Joyce.

"Of course this is something I want. I'd be crazy not to."

"Oh, Chris!" Joyce exclaimed as she burst into fresh tears and pulled him into another hug. "Thank you, thank you. I want you to feel safe at all times and I thought this was the best way."

"It is. It is."

About an hour later, Chris and Will had retreated to their bedroom to give each other their gifts for one another. Chris was amused to see that their gifts were nearly identical in shape and were wrapped in the same kind of wrapping paper.

"Well, good thing we had labels for our names, otherwise we'd be opening our own gifts," Chris pointed out.

Will giggled.

"Yeah, that would make for a great birthday story," he said. "Should we open them separately or together?"

"Together," Chris said.

Will nodded as he tore into the wrapping paper. Chris mimicked him. Within seconds, both of them were holding their gifts, staring at them

silently, but with happiness.

"Oh Will," Chris said as he admired the hand drawn picture of him and Will. The drawing was so lifelike that Chris had to stare hard at it to make sure it wasn't actually a photo. But he didn't own any red shirts like Will had drawn him with, so he knew it was something Will had drawn. Will had also gotten him a frame to go with it so the picture would stay in perfect condition. "I love it, thank you."

"I love mine, too," Will said just as quietly, staring down at the sketchbook Chris had gotten for him. Chris had managed to find a company that would print a custom cover on the sketchbook, and he picked their original cover for their Star Wars comics as the cover. His and Will's names lined the top of the page under the title: "The Continuing Adventures in Star Wars."

"I'm glad you like it," Chris said as he crawled over to Will and sat down next to him. "And I'm so grateful to your Mom...er, I guess she'll soon be my Mom, too."

"I can't believe you're gonna be my brother!" Will exclaimed.

"Neither can I," said Chris. "But it's felt like we were brothers ever since we were kids."

Will nodded at him.

"It was hard to keep us apart, even when Mike and the rest of the party came into the picture," he said, smiling at the memories. "I hated it when you moved with Aunt Pearl and Uncle Dale."

"I hated it, too," Chris admitted, nodding. "And I hate that they aren't here to celebrate with us..."

At this, Chris broke down into tears. Will wrapped his arms around Chris and hugged him, trying his best to comfort him.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Chris said, wiping away some of the tears.

"You don't have to apologize, Chris. It's your first birthday without them, it only makes sense that you would feel sad."

Chris nodded.

"Do you think this is what they would have wanted: for your Mom to adopt me?"

"I know they would," came a voice from behind the door.

Chris and Will looked up as Joyce opened the door and walked into the bedroom.

"Sorry, boys, I couldn't help but overhear," she said as she sat down on Chris' bed with them. "But I can promise you this, Chris: they would have wanted me to adopt you. I promised them I would take care of you, if anything ever happened to them. They promised me the same thing about you and Jonathan," she added, nodding at Will. "I'm adopting you because I love you, Chris, we all do, and I'm keeping my promise to your parents."

"Thank you," Chris said as he fell into Joyce's embrace. "I love you all, too."

4. Challenger

March 25, 1985

Chris dropped off his bike in its usual spot. Will and Mike mimicked him and followed him to the front porch. Just as they reached the door, they could hear arguing voices coming from inside.

"What's going on?" Will asked as they pressed their ears against the door.

"And whose truck is that over there?" Mike added as he glanced over and saw the truck sitting off to the side of the front of the house.

Chris shrugged. "No idea, but we should probably go inside and see what's up."

Will and Mike looked at each other and shrugged as well before Chris turned and opened the door. Immediately, the arguing voices came to a stop as they realized they were not alone. Chris filed into the living room with Will and Mike. Chris' eyes widened in shock when he realized who the visitor was.

"What are you doing here, Lonnie?" he demanded.

"Hey kiddo, happy late birthday," Lonnie said, attempting to sound happy. He looked at Will. "And you too," he added hastily. "I was just talking to your Aunt about her plans to adopt you."

"How in the world do you know about that?" asked Chris.

Lonnie smiled.

"Well, it seems the court felt it important to ask me if I would contest the adoption," Lonnie replied. "I asked them 'What adoption?' and that's when they told me that dear Joyce here wants to adopt you, Chris."

"Again, how is any of that your business, Lonnie?" Chris snarled. Will grabbed onto one of Chris' arms, gripping it tightly with a worried expression on his face. Chris ignored him.

"It's my business because you're MY nephew, Chris!"

"He's my nephew, Lonnie, and he's gonna be my son!" shouted Joyce

"Oh no he's not your nephew, Joyce, not since we got divorced!" Lonnie said triumphantly. "Legally, the two of you aren't even related anymore. The only reason I let him stay here is because of his request at Dale and Pearl's funeral."

"Let him stay?" said Joyce incredulously. "You have never once tried to contact Chris ever since I took him in and since the funeral! You have no business butting in to his adoption!"

"But I do have business here," retorted Lonnie. "Chris is biologically a relative of mine, so I have say if he gets adopted or not."

"No!" Will exclaimed, finally finding the courage to speak. "You're not going to take Chris away from us!"

Lonnie simply smiled at Will, though it was devoid of any emotion at all.

"But it's my right to, kiddo."

"You may have rights in this case, Lonnie, but ultimately it's up to Chris who he goes with," said Joyce.

"That will be up to a court to decide."

"What the hello are you talking about?" asked Joyce.

At this, Lonnie smiled again and pulled an envelope out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Joyce.

"That is a motion to bar you from adopting Chris until a court rules that I cannot have custody of him," he said.

"What do you want from me, Lonnie?" Chris asked.

"I just want you to have a good life, kiddo. I'm helping make sure of that."

"I already have a good life, thank you. I told you in December that I don't want or need anything from you, so why can't you let this go?"

"Because my brother would have wanted me to take care of you! How can you ask me why?"

"Oh, I don't know, Lonnie, probably because you haven't been around otherwise?" said Joyce sarcastically.

"Shut up!"

"Enough!" said Chris in a firm voice. Joyce and Lonnie hesitated; both of them closing their mouths as they looked ready to continue arguing. "We'll let the court decide if you can stop this adoption, Lonnie." Lonnie's face seemed to light up at this while Joyce looked crestfallen. "Don't look so happy about it, it's just to get you to back off. Now, get out of this house."

"Don't tell me..." Lonnie started but Chris quickly wriggled himself out of Will's grasp and leaned forward. Chris roughly grabbed Lonnie by the jacket and pulled him close.

"I said *get out*," Chris growled in a low tone.

Lonnie's eyes widened as Chris let go of his shirt. Lonnie shook himself briefly before straightening up and clearing his throat.

"All right, I'll go. And I'll see you in court."

With that, Lonnie pushed past Will and Mike, whose faces were white with shock and walked out the front door. None of them moved until they heard the truck's engine start up and drive away.

"Oh my god," Chris said, letting out the breath he hadn't realized he had been holding.

"It's okay, honey," Joyce said, rushing forward and pulling Chris into a hug. "We'll get an attorney and we'll make sure he doesn't get custody of you, okay?"

Chris nodded wordlessly at Joyce, who gave him a squeeze on the cheek.

"I'm going to make some calls to see if I can sort all of this out," she said. "You boys go hang out in the boys' room, why don't you? I'll call you out when I'm doing making the calls."

Chris and Will remained silent, both of them too shocked to say anything. After several seconds of silence, Mike spoke up.

"Yeah, Mrs. Byers, we'll go hang out in the bedroom," he said, grabbing Will by the arm and dragging him away. He repeated the gesture when he walked next to Chris.

"Thank you, Mike, and for the last time, call me Joyce."

Mike nodded but didn't say anything as he led Chris and Will into the bedroom. Once they were inside the door behind them closed, Mike finally let them go. Mike and Will sat down together on Will's bed while Chris remained standing, staring off into space.

"You okay, Chris?" Mike asked with concern.

Chris didn't say anything, but kept staring off in the distance.

"Chris?" said Will, starting to sound worried.

"How could he do this?" Chris said quietly, finally looking up at Will and Mike.

"I know, Chris, he's a shitty person, but it'll be okay," said Mike, trying his best to sound positive.

"We won't let him win," added Will, smiling softly at Chris.

"But what if we aren't successful?" said Chris, starting to sound manic. "What if the court rules in his favor? What if they make me go and live with him?"

"That'll never happen, Chris, we won't let it!" said Will.

Chris stumbled a few feet to the desk. He gripped it for support as he stared off again, as if he wasn't aware of Will and Mike.

"I can't breathe," he whispered. "I can't breathe."

"Chris!" Will exclaimed, jumping off the bed at the same time as Mike. Both of them hurried over to Chris and gripped each of his arms. They guided Chris to Will's bed and sat him down.

Chris started to heave as he couldn't breathe. Will couldn't help but let a single tear fall, his heart filling with worry as he looked at Chris.

"Chris, it's gonna be okay, it's gonna be okay," Will whispered into Chris' ear as he held on to his cousin.

"We're here, Chris," Mike added as he wrapped one arm around Chris and used the other to pat Chris on the back. "We're both here, me and Will. We're not leaving you."

"Just relax, Chris," said Will as he hugged Chris, the tears falling down his face quickly. "We're here, Chris, we're here."

"Close your eyes," Mike instructed. Chris did so and both Will and Mike let out sighs of relief. "Center your breathing. Focus on the good in your life, Chris. And know that will and I are here with you."

Slowly, Chris took several deep breaths, calmly himself down. His rate slowed and his body stopped shaking. After several seconds, he opened his eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"Shhh," said Mike. "It's okay, Chris."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Will said.

"I know, I know. I just can't believe what Lonnie's done. How could he do that?"

"He's a bastard," Will said shortly. "He's just doing this because he wants to have power."

"We won't let him get away with it," Mike added. "Hopper can help us tell the court who he really is."

"There's no way they'll find in his favor," Will said. "You'll be okay, Chris, and Mom will be able to adopt you."

"I hope you're right, Will," Chris whispered as he fell into Will's embrace. Mike joined their hug and held tightly onto Chris. "Thank you both for helping me."

"You never have to thank us for that," said Will.

"We're here with you all the way," said Mike. "We're the original members of the party. We'll always be there for each other."

"Thank goodness," whispered Chris.

Chris stiffened in his chair slightly as Lonnie gave his testimony to his attorney. He tried to tune out what Lonnie was saying and was largely successful; he only caught a handful of Lonnie's words. After what seemed an eternity, Lonnie's lawyer sat down at his desk.

Attorney Dallas Powell, who Joyce had hired on Hopper's recommendation, stood up. Chris felt his body relax a little and Joyce patted him on the shoulder, trying to reassure him.

"Mr. Byers," said Powell slowly as he walked to the witness stand. "Can you tell us, please, how long you've been divorced from your ex-wife?"

"About two years," Lonnie replied shortly.

"Two years," Powell repeated slowly. "And your ex-wife, my client, Joyce Byers, was granted full custody of your sons Jonathan and William, is that right?"

"It is," said Lonnie starting to stiffen a bit in his chair. Chris had to hide a grin when he saw this.

"Now, even though you don't have custody of your children, Mr. Byers, I'm sure you've been over to visit?" Powell asked. Lonnie didn't say anything. "Mr. Byers?"

Still, Lonnie said nothing. Powell looked at the judge.

"Your Honor, would you please instruct the witness to answer?" he asked.

The judge turned in her seat to face Lonnie.

"Please answer the question, Mr. Byers," she said.

Lonnie glared at the judge before he turned back to Powell.

"Yeah, I've visited before."

"But not that often, is that right, Mr. Byers?" asked Powell.

Once again, Lonnie didn't say anything, but stared back at Powell.

"Isn't it true that you've only seen your sons about five times since you and your wife divorced, Mr. Byers?"

"That might be right," said Lonnie quietly.

"You came back when your son William was missing, as any good father would, but as soon as he was found again, you disappeared."

"Objection!" said Lonnie's attorney, standing up.

"Overruled," said the judge. "Mr. Powell's questioning is reasonable. You may proceed, sir."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Powell. He turned back to Lonnie.

"And then, more recently, you came to your sons after your nephew, Christopher, was injured in a car accident. A car accident, that I might add, killed your brother and sister-in-law, is that correct, Mr. Byers?"

Lonnie didn't say anything, but Powell pressed on.

"Didn't your nephew Christopher tell you at that time that he wanted nothing from you, Mr. Byers? In fact, didn't your ex-wife challenge you, asking you where you had been while Christopher was recovering in the hospital?"

"She might have," whispered Lonnie.

"And yet, the second you found out that your ex-wife wanted to adopt Christopher, you came waltzing into Hawkins, demanding to know

why you hadn't been consulted about it, isn't that right?"

Lonnie remained silent.

"So, to recap: you've barely seen your sons recently in the two years since you and your ex-wife divorced. You came back when your son was missing, presumably doing what any good father would do if his child was missing, but then you left again as soon as your son was found. You then came back again when your brother and sister-in-law were killed in car accident, and your nephew told you then he needed nothing from you. Finally, you came back demanding to have your say in your nephew's adoption, despite your having been absent for much of your own children's lives in the last two years.

"Before you respond to that, Mr. Byers, let me just ask you one little question: What, in your tendency to be absent your son's lives, gives you the right to challenge your ex-wife's adoption of your nephew? A nephew, who I might add, loves your ex-wife as a mother already and thinks of your sons as his brothers.

"What gives you right, Mr. Byers, to try and take away your nephew's happiness?"

Lonnie said nothing and instead stared back at Powell, his eyes narrowing.

"Your silence is very telling, Mr. Byers," said Powell. "Withdrawn," he added, as he saw Lonnie's attorney start to stand up to raise an objection. "I have no further questions, Your Honor."

"Very well," said the judge. "You may step down, Mr. Powell."

Lonnie wordlessly obeyed the judge and returned to his seat next to his lawyer. The judge took a breath before she looked up again to speak.

"Cases such as these are never easy," she said. "Both parties in cases such as this one make compelling arguments as to whom should retain custody of a child. We've heard from both Mr. Byers and Mrs. Byers. And we've heard from young Christopher Byers. Based on the testimony we've heard today from all of those involved, I have come

to a decision regarding the custody of Christopher Byers.

Chris sat up in his chair as Joyce reached out and grabbed one of his hands. He held onto it tightly as the judge ruled.

"It is clear to me that Mr. Byers does care for his nephew. However, it is more apparent that Mrs. Byers has done everything in her power to ensure that young Christopher is loved and well cared for since the death of his parents. Therefore, it is this court's ruling that Mrs. Byers will retain custody of Christopher Byers."

At this, both Chris and Joyce let out breaths of relief. Joyce wrapped her arms around Chris and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"Mr. Byers, I appreciate you looking out for the interests of your nephew, but it is this court's ruling that his present arrangements are sufficient for the welfare of the child. Therefore, the motion by Mr. Byers to prevent the adoption of Christopher Byers by Joyce Byers is hereby denied. You may proceed with Christopher's adoption, Mrs. Byers. This court is adjourned."

The judge banged her gavel. Chris and Joyce stood up and hugged each other tightly before Joyce turned to Powell and shook his hand. Chris turned to face Will and Mike, who were sitting right behind him in the gallery and were already standing, both of them beaming. Chris pulled both of them into a hug.

"We did it!" Chris exclaimed.

"You're gonna be my brother!" said Will.

"It's all gonna be okay!" said Mike.

Suddenly, an angry scream and a loud crash erupted from the other end of the room. Chris broke the hug and turned around to see Lonnie had turned over the table where he had been sitting with his lawyer.

"THIS ISN'T OVER, JOYCE!" Lonnie shouted.

"Court officers, restrain Mr. Byers at once!" the judge demanded.

Two bailiffs hurried forward and grabbed Lonnie by the arms. He struggled against them, but they quickly overpowered him and cuffed his hands behind his back and led him out of the courtroom, leaving everyone in the room looking baffled.

"It's okay, honey," Joyce said after a few seconds had passed. "We won today, and that's what matters!"

Chris nodded at her and hugged her again.

"Let's go home," said Joyce. Chris followed her into the court gallery.

When Mike and Will joined them, Chris stood in between the two of them as they wrapped their arms around him. Together, the three of them walked out of the courtroom, determined never to let one another go.

5. Gone

Chris stifled yet another yawn. For some reason, he had been tossing and turning for several hours the night before, his mind racing following the events in the family courtroom. Although Joyce had assured him that everything would be okay, a part of him couldn't shake what happened when Lonnie was told of the verdict. Screaming "This isn't over!" wasn't a good sign, Chris thought.

The Party had decided to hang out together at the arcade. Actually, it had been Mike who suggested it after the family court hearing. Chris had accepted immediately, hoping a visit to the arcade would be a welcome distraction from everything going through his mind. It had worked for the most part; rather than focus on Lonnie's threat, Chris was able to focus on cheering on Dustin as he played Ms. PacMan or Max when she dominated in another game. He was able to focus when Will and Mike challenged him and Lucas to an air hockey game, which they lost spectacularly thanks to Lucas and his tendency to never pay attention when the puck came toward him.

Despite his mind being clear, Chris couldn't help but yawn all through the afternoon. The lack of sleep was getting to him. He wasn't sure if he was going to make it through the rest of the day. Chris glanced at his watch, sighing. It was only 2:32, and his plans had planned on being at the arcade until dinnertime at least.

"You okay, Chris?" asked Mike as they walked over to a Star Wars game that he was going to try.

"I'm just tired is all," Chris replied. "I had a lot on my mind last night and I couldn't go to sleep for the life of me until about 2:30 this morning. Um...I was kinda thinking of going home so I could get some sleep. I don't wanna ruin this hang out, but..."

"No, don't worry about!" Mike exclaimed, turning to Chris and giving him a playful punch on the arm. "If you're tired, you should go home and get some rest."

"Are you sure? I don't wanna ruin our good time."

"Chris, how many times do we have to tell you, you *never* ruin our good times," said Dustin, rolling his eyes slightly.

"Yeah, come on, if you're tired, you're tired," said Lucas.

"You'll miss me kick these guys' asses at every other game, but I'll make sure to tell you all about it in school tomorrow!" Max exclaimed.

"But..."

"Chris," said El in her tone of voice that Chris hadn't quite gotten used to yet, even though it had been more than three months since he first met her. "Take some time and rest. Your body needs it."

Chris sighed, staring at all of his friends before he nodded.

"All right, all right, y'all are that desperate to get rid of me," he said sarcastically. "Hey, maybe Will can join Lucas in the next game of air hockey and you'll actually not suck!"

"Hey!" Lucas shouted while the rest of the party roared with laughter. Lucas joined them after a few seconds of glaring at Chris indignantly.

"Well, I hope you all have fun playing games. I'm sorry to be a buzzkill, but you're right, I really should go home and get some rest."

Chris walked up to each of his friends and gave them goodbye hugs. Most of the party walked off after they said their goodbyes, but Mike and Will stayed behind.

"Do you want me to walk you home?" asked Will a little timidly.

Chris shook his head.

"I'll be okay, Will," he said, giving his cousin a hug. "I promise."

"I know you will be, but I can't help worry about what Dad said to us in court yesterday. That 'This isn't over' scared me."

"It scared me too, Will," said Chris nodding. "But I don't think he'll be able to do anything, not with the court ruling against him."

"Still, take care of yourself if you run into anyone strange going home," said Mike as Chris gave him a hug. "I don't want you to get hurt or anything."

"Thanks, Mike, but I'll be okay. I handled Troy, didn't I?"

"That's true," said Mike, sounding reassured. "Just be careful, okay?"

"I always am," Chris replied.

Will wrapped his arms around Chris again. Chris chuckled to himself quietly.

"Get home safe, please," Will whispered.

"I will. I promise. I'll see you soon, Will."

Will broke apart the hug and nodded, wiping a tear away from his eyes. Chris gave him a reassuring smile before Mike grabbed onto Will's shoulder and pulled him away, waving at Chris.

Chris unlocked the front door with his spare key. He opened the door and walked inside, yawning deeply for what seemed the umpteenth time that day. Shaking his head slightly, he closed the door and walked into the living room, tossing his jacket onto the couch, thinking he would use it as a pillow. Chris flipped through the mail, which he had picked up on his way inside, looking for anything of interest, but finding only bills. He walked into the kitchen and set down the mail for Joyce to find before walking back into the living room.

It was back in the living room when he heard it. Chris froze in his tracks. He could have sworn he heard someone take a breath of air, as if trying to hide the fact that they were in the room with Chris. Chris looked around the living room, but didn't see anyone.

"Hello?" he called, sounding nervous. He took a few cautious steps forward, his eyes darting around the room, looking for a sign of life. "Hel-"

Chris froze again when he heard the sound of a revolver cocking in

front of him. As if materializing out of the air, the gun appeared in front of his face, mere inches away. Chris stared at the barrel of the gun as the intruder came into focus; he had been blending in with the darkness of the living room before he stepped in front of Chris. The man was wearing an all-black outfit complete with a ski mask that hid his face.

"Welcome home, Chris Byers," the man said in a menacing voice.

Chris remained rooted to the spot, all of his defenses failing him. He didn't even consider running, his mind had stopped all major function, it seemed. The intruder walked closer to him, holding the gun to Chris' face. When he was right in front of Chris, the intruder lowered the gun and held it against Chris' neck. Chris held his breath as he waited for the next move, too terrified to do anything else. Suddenly, the intruder grabbed onto Chris roughly and shoved him as Chris gasped in horror.

Will walked into his and Chris' room, thinking Chris had fallen asleep in his bed. He knocked on the door gently, not wanting to scare Chris awake. When he didn't get a response, Will frowned and opened the door. He glanced to Chris' bed and realized right away that Chris was not in their room. Will hurried from the bedroom and ran into the living room just as Joyce was walking in through the front door.

"Hey, honey, how was the arcade?" she asked.

"It was fine," Will said distractedly. "Um...you didn't see Chris outside, did you?"

"No, I thought he went with you to the arcade," said Joyce as she set down her purse, immediately starting to look worried.

"He was, but he left early and came home to take a nap; he didn't get much sleep last night."

"Oh my god, did he make it here safely?"

Will had walked into the living room and saw Chris' jacket laying on the couch as if it had been thrown there. It was the same jacket that

Chris had been wearing at the arcade just a few hours earlier.

"He definitely got here okay," said Will, pointing at the jacket as Joyce joined him in the living room. "That's the jacket he wore to the arcade."

"And he's not in your room?" Joyce demanded.

Will shook his head.

"Maybe he went out to Castle Byers," he observed, hoping to himself that it was the case. "He always used to like taking naps in there when we were little."

"Okay, you check in there and I'll check around the front, see if maybe he went for a walk," said Joyce, doing her best to mask the worry in her tone of voice. It didn't fool Will, though. Anytime his Mom was worried, he knew instantly just by looking at her eyes.

"Okay, I'll come out front and let you know in a minute," Will said. He turned around and hurried out the backdoor. He ran across the yard to Castle Byers as quickly as his legs would carry him.

Will bent down and crawled into his favorite hiding place and Chris' favorite napping spot. Even before he saw that Chris wasn't inside, he could feel his heart drop. He looked around fruitlessly for several seconds before he sighed deeply and crawled back outside.

"Where are you, Chris?" Will whispered as he ran out to the front yard. He could hear his mother shouting Chris' name. Will's heart sank again; it wasn't like Chris to not respond instantly if he heard Joyce calling his name.

Will reached the front porch and stood on it, waiting for his mother. She joined him after several minutes, the worry engulfed on her face.

"Any luck?" she asked, sounding hopeful.

Will shook his head sadly and stared at the ground in shame.

If I hadn't let Chris leave the arcade, this wouldn't have happened.

Suddenly, a glint on the porch caught Will's eye. He bent down to examine it and his eyes widened in shock when he realized what it was.

"Oh my god!" Will exclaimed. "It's Chris' necklace!"

"What?" Joyce yelled, bending down and kneeling next to Will.

"He got me one for Christmas just like it," Will explained. "It has his initials on it and there's a picture of us from a few summers ago in the charm. This is his necklace. He left it here for us."

"But what does that mean?" Joyce demanded, sounding frantic. "If he left his necklace behind, does that mean he was kidnapped?"

Will looked at his mother, contemplating what she had just said. He stared at her for a few moments before nodding.

"I think you'd better call Hopper," he said.

6. Search

Joyce hung up the phone while Will and Jonathan sat on the couch waiting for her. In the 20 minutes or so since they had discovered Chris missing, she had been on the phone constantly and Will had to explain to Jonathan what was happening.

"Okay, boys, I'm gonna need you to pack your bags quickly," Joyce said as she walked over to the couch. "Hopper's officers are gonna need to search the house for any clues into what happened to Chris and we can't be here while they do that, so you two are going to stay the night at the Wheeler's house."

"What about you?" Jonathan demanded.

"I'm going with Hopper. We're gonna go out looking for Chris, talk to some of his classmates, see if they saw or heard anything."

"I'm going with you," said Jonathan.

"I am too," said Will, standing up and looking determined.

"No," said Joyce firmly. "I know you boys want to help look, but I need you two to stay at the Wheeler's tonight. It's for the best, this way we don't get separated and have to go looking for you too. And before you say anything, Will, I know that you feel bad about letting Chris leave the arcade, but you couldn't know that this was going to happen, okay honey? You did nothing wrong."

Will was taken aback by his mother's statement. She must have known he was silently blaming himself for Chris going missing; she had a way of knowing things like that. Will just nodded, but didn't say anything.

"Now, go pack your bags, boys, and I'll drop you off at the Wheeler's."

"Thanks for taking them on such short notice, Karen," Joyce said hurriedly as Will and Jonathan walked into the Wheeler's home.

"Oh, don't worry, Joyce, anything we can do to help," said Mrs.

Wheeler. "You call us as soon as you find out anything about Chris, okay?"

"I will," said Joyce. "You boys be good. I'll call you if anything turns up. We might be out all night, so don't wait up for a call, okay boys?"

Will and Jonathan nodded. Joyce turned and walked away from the door, hurrying back to the car as Karen shut the door.

"Come on, let's get upstairs," said Nancy, who had greeted the brothers along with Karen. "You can take the spare bedroom, Jonathan."

Jonathan nodded wordlessly and followed Nancy upstairs, doing what he could to hide his tears.

Karen turned to Will.

"Mike is downstairs waiting for you," she said kindly. "You can go on down there. I'll call you from up here if your Mom calls, okay?"

Will nodded.

"Thank you, Mrs. Wheeler. I'm sorry for all the trouble of having us over tonight..."

"Oh no, dear, don't you worry about it. I understand completely. We just have to make sure your Mom and Chief Hopper find Chris as quickly as possible."

"Yeah, that's true," said Will, nodding again. "I'll go and find Mike downstairs."

"Okay, Will. You try to get some sleep, you hear? The second your Mom calls with any news, I'll come and find you and let you know."

"Thank you," said Will absentmindedly as he walked over to the basement door and walked down the steps, desperate to see Mike. He walked down the stairs as quickly as he could and was relieved when he saw Mike sitting down on the couch, having already prepped the old pillow fort he had made for Eleven when she was hiding in the basement.

"Hey!" Mike exclaimed when he saw Will. Mike stood up and hurried over to Will.

"I'm really glad to see you," Will said just before he burst into tears and Mike reached him. Will wrapped his arms around Mike's neck and sobbed into Mike's shoulder as Mike hugged him back tightly.

"It's okay, Will, it's okay," Mike whispered as he patted Will's back. "I'm here. I'm here."

It took Will several moments to calm down. As Mike whispered words of serenity into his ears, Will slowed his breathing down and stopped the crying. He steadied his breath as best as he could before he finally stood up straight, but kept close to Mike, who held him up as they looked each other in the eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Will said breathlessly. "I just can't believe he's missing!"

"I know," said Mike, nodding sympathetically. "It kinda feels like before, only you're here now and Chris is missing."

Will nodded as he broke apart from the hug. Mike turned around and led Will over to the pillow fort, which had enough pillows and blankets set up on the floor for both of them to fit under. Will couldn't help but chuckle when he saw this.

"I guess we're sleeping under here?" he mused.

Mike shrugged.

"I just thought it'd be better if we slept close by, this way we both can find out any news about Chris. If this is too much, it's fine, I can go sleep on the couch-"

Will grabbed one of Mike's hands, which shut Mike right up.

"That's exactly what I want," Will whispered. "Thank you for thinking of it."

"No problem," said Mike, blushing slightly. "Um, I'll finish getting it ready while you change and get ready for bed."

"Okay," said Will, lifting his hand off Mike's and walking back upstairs to get his bag, which he had left by the front door. Will changed in the bathroom and hurriedly brushed his teeth before he rushed back downstairs. Mike was already lying on the pillow fort, as if waiting for Will to arrive. Will crawled inside and took his spot beside Mike.

They were only a few inches apart, but Will had never felt safer. Sleeping next to Mike always felt like home, even more so than his own home did. Will wrapped one of the blankets around himself and turned to look at Mike, their faces only inches apart.

"I feel so terrible," Will admitted. "Like it's my fault that he went missing."

"Hey," said Mike, reaching forward and awkwardly putting one of his hands on Will's arm. "You didn't know this was going to happen. He was tired from not being able to sleep last night. There was no way any of us were going to stop him from leaving to go home and rest, not even you or me. I promise you, no matter where Chris is, he doesn't blame you at all for this."

Will nodded.

"I just wish this hadn't happened," he said. "I'm so scared for Chris."

"I am too," said Mike. "He's my first best friend, besides you. I can't stand the thought of him being in pain or in trouble. But listen, we'll radio Eleven tomorrow, see if she can tell us anything about where he is."

"Thank you," said Will, then he hesitated. "Um, I know this is weird to ask and please feel free to say no, but can I...can I hold one of your hands while we sleep? It'll help me know that you're here if I wake up in the middle of the night."

"Of course you can," said Mike without hesitation. He held one of his hands and Will took it in his own. That action alone seemed to calm Will down completely. Now, he knew he was safe, at least for the night.

"Thanks, Mike," Will said as he closed his eyes, the tiredness washing over him. "I'm so lucky to have you."

"I'm lucky to have you, and Chris," said Mike. "I'd do anything for the both of you."

Eleven wrapped the blindfold around her head, the task feeling like an old habit that she just couldn't shake. As soon as her eyes were closed and the blindfold was over her eyes, the electronics around her started to cackle. It was easier, now, for her to enter the other realms without someone watching her constantly, expecting results.

Her first choice was to search the Upside Down, though she had a feeling she would know if that's where Chris was. As soon as she landed in the other realm, she could sense that Chris wasn't there, but rather, he was close by. Eleven steadied her breathing and focused sharply. The realm opened up and revealed Chris' location.

Eleven slowly approached the bed that had materialized from nowhere. She could hear a boy crying and she recognized the breathing as Chris'.

"Chris?" she called out, her voice echoing throughout the dimension she was in. Chris didn't respond, but Eleven shook her head, knowing that it was unlikely for Chris to hear her.

Once Eleven saw Chris, she nearly fainted with shock. Chris was lying on a bed, his clothes rumpled up and tears streaming down his face. His legs were bound together with duct tape and his hands were above his head on the iron bed's headboard. He was handcuffed to the iron bed and it looked to Eleven that Chris was doing whatever he could to escape.

"Someone," Chris said in voice barely louder than a whisper. "Please, help me. Help me! This man, I don't know who he is, but he knows my name. Help me, please!"

"It's okay, Chris," Eleven whispered back, hoping that it was possible for Chris to hear her. "I can tell you're close, Chris. We'll find you soon, I promise. Just hold on a little bit longer."

Eleven watched as Chris, as though he could hear her word of assurances, nodded slowly.

Mike and Will looked up as the walkie talkie cackled and Eleven's voice came ringing through it.

"He's not in the Upside Down," she said. "But he's close by."

"Close? How close? Still in Hawkins?" Will demanded.

"Yes," said Eleven. "He's really scared and he's trying what he can to escape. I saw him start to fight the tape around his legs."

"Tape around his legs" gasped Will. "Oh my goodness!"

"El, did you see or hear anything else?" asked Mike gently.

"It was a weird bed frame. It was white and made of metal."

"That sounds like an iron bed frame," said Mike, nodding. "Did he say who he was with?"

"No, but it sounds like the person who has him knows who he is. Chris said he knows his name."

"Oh my god," Will said standing up quickly. Mike stood up, too.

"What is it?" Mike asked as Will's eyes widened.

"We've got talk to Dad," Will said. "He has to know who's behind kidnapping Chris. El said that Chris' attacker knows his name. That means he's gotta be connected to Dad somehow. I mean, 'This isn't over, Joyce?' This is what he meant!"

"Kidnapping Chris?" exclaimed Mike, flabbergasted. "That's insane!"

"Yeah and Dad is an insane person. We've got to tell Mom and Hopper what we know. Eleven, can you get a hold of Hopper and tell him to get to Mike's house as fast as he can."

"Yes," said Eleven. "I'll radio him and tell him to meet all of us there. I

can help find Chris faster now that I was able to find him."

"Okay, get here safely, please," Mike pleaded. "I don't want anyone to get hurt here, okay, El? Promise me!"

"I promise," El said before the boys heard her switch off the walkie talkie.

Will turned to Mike and pulled him into another hug.

"How didn't we think of this first? I knew Dad was gonna try something."

"I know," said Mike. "But now that we know he's involved, Hopper can go with El and find Chris and we can end this."

7. Race Against Time

Will and Mike stood up as El hurried down into the basement, where the two boys had been sitting on the couch, waiting desperately for El to arrive along with Joyce and Hopper.

"Are they here yet?" El demanded as Mike hugged her.

Mike shook his head.

"He should be here any minute, though," said El as she hugged Will, too. "He responded to my message and said he would get here quickly."

As if on cue, they heard the front door open, followed by Karen greeting Hopper and Joyce. Hopper politely told Karen that they needed to find the kids and Karen told them to go downstairs. But, Will, Mike and El beat them to it, running up the stairs as quickly as their legs would carry them. Joyce gasped when she saw Will and pulled him into a hug.

"What's going on?" Joyce asked. "Hopper said you found Chris?"

"We just know Dad's behind it," Will replied as he broke apart the hug. Joyce's eyes widened in shock; she hadn't been prepared for that answer.

"How do you know?" asked Hopper, though he didn't look surprised.

"I saw Chris," El explained. "I looked in the Upside Down, but he's not there. He's close by, but I don't know where. He's really scared. He said the man who took him knows his name."

"And when Dad said 'This isn't over, Joyce' in the courtroom, that means he's the one who did this, or he hired someone to kidnap Chris!" Will exclaimed. "We've got to go and question Dad and get him to tell us where Chris is."

Joyce looked up at Hopper, unsure of what to do. Hopper looked back at her and nodded.

"I don't know why we didn't start there," Hopper said gruffly. "I should've known he was involved, especially after that threat he made to you in court. El, I need you to come with us. He won't talk even with me threatening him, but maybe you can scare him into talking."

"I'm coming too," said Will. "I want him to look me in the eyes and tell me what he did."

"Then I'm coming too," added Mike.

"No, you guys should stay here," Hopper started, but Joyce cut him off.

"No, they're right. Will deserves to hear it straight from Lonnie's mouth. Chris is going to be his brother and my son, Hop. We're going with you."

Hopper stared from Joyce to the kids, as if knowing he was going to be overruled in this argument.

"Fine," said Hopper gruffly. "Just keep calm when we confront him. El and I will get him to talk."

Hopper slammed his hand onto Lonnie's front door, shouting as loud as he could.

"Lonnie! Open this door now!" Hopper ordered. "Do it now, Lonnie! I know you're in there and you can't hide."

At that, the front door opened and Lonnie stood in the doorway, looking rather amused.

"Hopper, how nice to see you again," he said with an air of pleasantries.

"Shut up!" Hopper snarled as he grabbed Lonnie by the shirt and forced him back as he stepped into the house. Will and Joyce followed closely while Mike and El brought up the rear. "Get your ass in here!"

Hopper shoved Lonnie to the ground.

"What the hell was that for?"

"WHERE'S CHRIS?" Joyce yelled as soon as she was in the living room. "Where is he, you son of a bitch?"

Lonnie chuckled.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, can it, Dad," said Will, looking as angry as any of them had ever seen him before. "We know you kidnapped Chris. Who else would take him if they knew who he was? You would do anything to get custody of him, even though you don't love him!"

"That's not fair," Lonnie said as he stood up, holding the ribs he had landed on when Hopper threw him to the ground. "I love Chris. I was just trying to do the right thing."

"Spare me, Lonnie," Joyce said with a fire in her eyes. "And tell me where the hell you or the kidnapper is holding him."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Lonnie repeated. "Why would I kidnap Chris?"

"Just tell them where Chris is!" Mike yelled.

"This is getting us nowhere," said Hopper. "El, get him to talk."

El nodded at Hopper and faced Lonnie, her face scrunched up in concentration. With a fumble, Lonnie fell to the ground again, this time on his rear end. It would have been funny to Mike and Will if the situation wasn't as serious as it was. Blood started to form on El's left nostril as it always did when she used her powers.

"Tell us where Chris is," El instructed, staring hard at Lonnie.

Lonnie laughed coldly.

"What are you gonna do about it if I don't, little girl?"

El concentrated again and everyone watched as Lonnie's arm twisted itself into an uncomfortable angle. Lonnie shrieked in pain as El maintained her concentration.

"Tell us where Chris is," El repeated.

"How the hell did you do that, you freak?" Lonnie demanded.

"Just tell us where he is and you won't be in any more pain!" Hopper exclaimed.

"I have no idea what you're..."

But before Lonnie could utter his lie again, El twisted his arm so violently that it threatened to break if she bent it any further. Lonnie screamed out as El held his arm in that position, the glare never leaving her face.

"Okay, okay!" Lonnie shouted. "He's at a buddy's house down on Greenwich! At John Mitchell's house. He's okay, I told John not to hurt Chris."

"Release him, El," Hopper instructed.

El broke her concentration and wiped the blood away from her nose as she continued to glare down at Lonnie.

"You listen to me, you son of a bitch," Hopper said as he knelt next to Lonnie and grabbed his shirt roughly again. "You better hope nothing has happened to Chris, or so help me, I'll make sure you never see the light of day again."

Hopper let go of Lonnie and shoved Lonnie's arms behind his back. Lonnie shouted in pain again, but Hopper ignored it. Hopper took out his handcuffs and cuffed Lonnie behind his back. He stood Lonnie up and shoved him roughly onto the sofa.

"Okay, I'll go and get Chris," Hopper said.

"I'm coming with you," said Joyce, rolling up her sleeves.

"No," said Hopper firmly. "You go home with Will and Mike. I'll take

El with me and we'll make sure we get Chris back home safely."

"But..."

"Listen to me, Joyce. I know John Mitchell: he's almost certainly armed and I don't need any blood being spilled here, okay? El and I will go in and make sure he can't hurt Chris any more and then we'll bring Chris back to you, safe and sound."

Joyce looked as if she wanted to protest, but instead, she nodded.

"Okay, just be careful, Hop," she said pulling him into a hug. "What about Lonnie?"

"I'll radio some back up to come and pick him up. You three can go on back to the house. I'll let you know when we have Chris."

Hopper and El managed to get into John Mitchell's house without being noticed. The living room was empty and the house was eerily quiet. Together, the two of them crept through the house, searching the bathroom first before checking other rooms. Just as they cleared the kitchen, they heard someone yell from one of the bedrooms. Hopper motioned for El to follow him and the two of them ran to the door where they could hear the voices from inside the bedroom.

"Don't move," demanded one voice.

"Why?" asked the second.

"One move: lights out."

Hopper looked at El with widened eyes.

"Is that Chris telling him not to move?" he asked in a voice as quietly as he could.

El nodded at him just as they heard the first voice scream and the second voice grunt. They heard a thud as a body fell to the ground. With this, Hopper kicked the door in, holding his gun out in front of him.

"Police, freeze!" he shouted before he realized Chris was standing up, holding part of an iron bed post in his hands. Chris was breathing heavily, looking at the ground, where John Mitchell lay, unconscious. Chris took several deep breaths before he raised the iron bed post again.

"Chris, stop!" Hopper yelled.

8. Taunting

"Remember, one move: lights out," said the kidnapper, staring down at Chris with the gun trained on Chris' head. Chris didn't respond verbally, but he nodded. "That's a good boy. Now, I'll be back shortly, so don't you go trying to get out of here either."

Chris closed his eyes, as if that would make his kidnapper clear the room faster. He tried to find a happy spot in his mind, but it was difficult with his body being so uncomfortable. His legs were tied together with duct tape and his arms were hanging on either side of his head, handcuffed to the headboard of the bed he was lying in.

As soon as he heard the front door close and the car drive away, Chris started to try and break something, anything that would free him. He rammed his arms up and down, trying to loosen the iron post he was handcuffed to. Chris also kicked his legs, trying as hard as he could to get them free. He felt the duct tape getting looser and breathed a little easier. But he was still having difficulty with the bedpost; no matter how hard he tried, it didn't seem to want to budge.

Suddenly, Chris looked up as if he could sense someone was in the room with him. He looked around, but couldn't see anyone, but he was sure someone was in the room with him. Chris strained his ears, listening as closely as he could.

"Chris?" came a faint voice. Chris' eyes widened in shock. It sounded to him like it was Eleven. He knew that she was able to visit people who weren't physically in the same place as her, and thought maybe she was attempting to reach him. But rather than rely solely on that hope, Chris instead tried to reach out, to tell someone what he could.

"Someone," he said in a voice that was barely louder than a whisper. It was the same tone that he had heard the voice. "Please, help me! Help me! This man, I don't know who he is, but he knows my name. Help me, please!"

Chris closed his eyes, desperate for the voice to reach back out to him, to let him know they had heard him. He started to cry when he

didn't get a response for several seconds, worried that he was just hearing things. But then, he heard the voice again, still faint, but clearly able to understand.

"It's okay, Chris," whispered the voice. Chris listened hard. He was sure it was Eleven, but he couldn't explain how he knew that. "I can tell you're close, Chris. We'll find you soon, I promise. Just hold on a little bit longer."

A little bit longer? Chris thought to himself. He wasn't sure he could do it, but then again, he had been alive this long, hadn't he? The kidnapper could have killed him at any point during the night, but he didn't. Chris hadn't slept for fear of being killed, but his kidnapper hadn't made any attempt on his life.

Slowly, Chris nodded, hoping that the voice would somehow understand his response. When he was finished, Chris took several deep breaths before he worked at loosening the iron bed post some more. After several minutes of working, he felt the bar start to loosen and breathed a sigh of relief. He felt that one good tug would be enough to free the bed post and he would be able to use it as a weapon when his kidnapper was least expecting it.

For the next hour, Chris also worked to loosen the duct tape some more on his legs. After what seemed an eternity, he could tell the duct tape was close to breaking, but he didn't want his kidnapper to see it, so he stopped. Just as he did, he heard the front door slam, announcing the return of his kidnapper.

Chris shut his eyes, hoping that his kidnapper would think he was resting and wouldn't have the gun out if he saw Chris looking so vulnerable. He waited with baited breath as he heard the approaching footsteps before they stopped next to the bed. Chris could hear the raspy breathing of his kidnapper.

"Open your eyes," the kidnapper ordered.

Chris did so and glared at the man, who had not even bothered to put the mask back on. Now that he could a look at the man, Chris thought he looked vaguely familiar, but couldn't place the face. The man had short, dark hair with black eyes. He had a bit of a beard

growing on his face. The man was middle-aged, around Hopper's age if Chris had to guess.

"Have you been a good boy?"

Chris simply stared back at the kidnapper, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of an answer.

"Now, that's not polite, young Chris, yet I was told that you were a polite person," said the kidnapper in a mocking tone. "Answer me, now."

Chris glared at the man, but remained silent.

"Very well," said the kidnapper, pulling his revolver out of his pocket and pointing it at Chris.

"All right, all right, I'll talk," Chris said hastily, his throat dry. "Yes, I was good."

"Hmmm...I'm not sure if I believe you." The kidnapper grabbed Chris' mouth roughly and forced it to be held open. He then pointed the gun directly above Chris' mouth, ready to pull the trigger. "Now, you say..."

Chris groaned slightly as the kidnapper roughly held his mouth.

"I wanna live," Chris said, begging for his life and sounding like he was close to tears. "I'll do anything...anything. Oh, you're hurting me..."

"Yes, you will," the kidnapper whispered. He then pulled the gun away and looked up, as if he had heard something coming from outside. The kidnapper walked over to the window, which was next to the dresser, and set his gun down. He looked out the window, but he didn't seem to see anything. The kidnapper turned back to Chris.

"You know, you could tell me who hired you," Chris said nonchalantly. "Maybe I can offer you something they can't."

"Shut up!" the kidnapper demanded and Chris noticed a faint hint of worry in his voice. Whatever the kidnapper had heard spooked him

and he didn't seem entirely convinced that someone wasn't outside of the house.

"Just tell me who it was," said Chris. "You don't even have to mention a last name. Just give me a first name. And I'll make sure I get you something that they can't. Trust me on that."

"Your uncle Lonnie wouldn't take too kindly to that," said the kidnapper, turning away.

Chris felt his whole body stiffen and a fire light in him.

"I should've known," he whispered before he pulled hard again and the iron bed post he was handcuffed to finally snapped. Without hesitating, Chris stood up from the bed, which broke the duct tape binding his legs. Finally free, Chris lunged at the kidnapper, who had realized a second too late what was happening.

Chris let out a scream as he used the bedpost to hit his kidnapper in the face. The kidnapper grunted and fell to the ground. Chris whacked the post again, hitting the kidnapper in the arm. The kidnapper then made to stand up and go for the gun on the dresser.

"No!" Chris screamed as he kicked the kidnapper in the groin. The kidnapper groaned loudly, holding the spot where Chris had kicked him as Chris held the iron bedpost at his throat.

For the first time, the kidnapper looked genuinely frightened. Even the noise he had heard moments ago hadn't scared him as much as being at Chris' mercy.

"Don't move!" Chris ordered in a seething voice.

"Why?" the kidnapper asked as he started to stand up, moaning slightly as his body full felt the impact of Chris' blows. "What are you gonna do?"

"One move: lights out," Chris snarled, repeating the threat the kidnapper had used against him.

The kidnapper merely laughed as Chris stared at him, still holding the iron post to his throat. After a few seconds, Chris screamed again

as he drew back his arm and used it to whack the kidnapper across the head. The kidnapped grunted as he fell to the ground unconscious.

Chris was breathing heavily as he stared down at his attacker's unconscious body. He took several breaths to try and calm down his heart rate, but the adrenaline was pumping through him so quickly that it wasn't happening. He thought he had heard a voice shout just as he hit the kidnapper, but he didn't turn around, wanting to focus all of his attention on his attacker.

Finally, Chris raised the iron post to hit the kidnapper again, hoping to spare some other poor soul from going through the same ordeal as him. He was just about to drop his arm when he heard the voice behind me.

"Chris, don't!"

Chris froze.

9. Together Again

Hopper returned his gun to the holster as Chris turned around. Chris' eyes widened in shock when he saw Hopper and El standing in the doorway. Hopper stepped forward with his arms raised to show Chris that he wasn't armed.

"It's okay, Chris," Hopper said. "We're here now, you can put the iron post down now, okay? Put it down and we'll get you out of here."

Chris took several deep breaths before he dropped the bedpost with a thud and burst into tears. Hopper rushed forward and pulled Chris into a hug.

"You're okay, Chris," Hopper said in a soothing voice. "You're okay."

It was several moments before Chris calmed down and the tears stopped falling down his face. When Chris stopped crying, Hopper broke apart the hug, but kept a hand on Chris' shoulder.

"I'm going to wake him up, Chris. You'll have to stay in this house just for a minute while I get him out of here, but El will stay with you, okay?"

Chris nodded, but remained silent, as if he had lost his voice. Hopper walked over to the kidnapper and shook him awake as El stepped over to Chris and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him away. They walked into one of the other bedrooms and sat down on the bed together. El kept a hand on Chris' shoulder as she looked at him with concern in her eyes.

"Are you okay?" she asked gently.

Chris nodded.

"I heard you," he whispered, finally having found his voice again. "When you told me it was going to be okay. I knew it was you, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that was me," El said. "I'm glad that you were able to hear me."

"It helped me work to break free," Chris explained. "I managed to get the bed post super loose and the duct tape around my legs. When he told me that Lonnie was behind all of this, I kind of snapped and was able to break free all the way. I hit him several times with the post. If you guys hadn't shown up, I might have killed him. Oh god..."

Chris started to dissolved into tears again. El pulled him closer to her and let him sob on her shoulder. She spoke in a soothing tone as Chris cried.

"You didn't, Chris, you didn't," said El. "You had every right to defend yourself against him. He had a gun on you, Chris. You did what you had to so you could survive."

Finally, Chris nodded at her.

"I don't know how I'm going to get through this," he said.

"Be with your family and with your friends," El said. "We will help you get through it. You're not going to go through this alone. I promise."

"Thank you, El."

"Of course."

At that, there was a soft knock on the door as Hopper peered in.

"The backup is here," he said. "They'll go over this whole house for evidence. We can get you out of here, Chris. There's a blanket out here for you to use while I drive you home. I'll be outside waiting for you both."

El helped Chris stand up and the two of them walked out of the bedroom. El picked up the blanket it and carried it as she led Chris through the rest of the house and to the front door. She opened it for Chris, who stepped out first and got his first look at the rest of the police force arriving on scene.

"It's over, Chris," El said as she wrapped the blanket around Chris' shoulders. She stepped out onto the porch with Chris, who was staring around at all of the people arriving at the house. There were

forensic people, other officers and even a couple of detectives standing around the house, getting ready to go inside.

Hopper spotted Chris and El exiting the house and walked over to them.

"He's still alive," Hopper said, hoping that would reassure Chris.

"I don't know how," Chris replied in a broken voice.

"You did what you had to," said Hopper.

Chris simply stared back at Hopper, at a loss for words.

"Let's get you out of here, Chris," El said. "Let's get you out of here."

She helped guide Chris down the steps of the porch as Hopper extended his hand as well, putting it on Chris' back as they helped him down the steps and away from his kidnapper's home. Together, El and Hopper helped Chris into Hopper's SUV before they got in, too and Hopper drove them away.

El nearly had to hold Chris down as Hopper pulled into the driveway of the Byers home. Chris had sat up as soon as he saw his home and he seemed desperate to want to get inside and try to forget everything that had happened in the last 24 hours, though he knew he would be unable to.

"We're almost there," El whispered into his ear so that Hopper wouldn't hear. "You'll see them in a minute."

Chris nodded at her and relaxed his body a bit. He knew Joyce, Jonathan and Will wouldn't take kindly to seeing him jumping out of a moving vehicle, even if Hopper was slowing down as he approached the house. So, instead, he sat back patiently and waited for Hopper to park the car. Even before Hopper had turned off the engine, Chris had opened the door and was running toward his home. Joyce, Jonathan, Will and Mike were running toward him too.

"Oh, Chris!" Joyce exclaimed as she wrapped her arms around him. "Are you all right? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" Chris replied as he started to cry again.

"You're safe, baby, you're safe," Joyce assured Chris as she held him tightly. The boys all joined their hug before Chris and Joyce broke apart so she could go speak to Hopper and Chris turned to Jonathan and hugged him. El had approached them as well and was hugging Mike and Will.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Jonathan demanded.

"I'm sure. He wasn't able to hurt me too badly. Just when he shoved me around while he dragged me away from here."

"Oh my god," Will whispered as Chris and Jonathan broke apart their hug. "I'm so sorry, Chris!"

"No," Chris said as he threw his arms around Will and pulled him close. "None of this is on you, Will. It was all Lonnie. He would've found a way even if I hadn't come home alone yesterday. And then you might have gotten hurt. I wish it hadn't happened at all, but I'm so glad you didn't get hurt, too, Will."

"I'm just glad you're home," Will said as they broke apart their hug.

"Me too," said Chris. "I don't know how much it's gonna feel like home after what happened yesterday, but I'll make it through, somehow."

Will nodded as Chris pulled Mike into a hug.

"Thanks for taking care of him," Chris whispered into Mike's ear.

"How'd you know?"

"I know you, Mikey. If anyone in the Party is a protector, it's you."

"Well, I didn't want him to blame himself. I'm really glad you're back."

They broke apart their hug and Chris pulled El into a hug again.

"Thank you for coming to get me, and for telling me it was going to

be okay. You helped me survive."

"Friends protect friends."

Chris sat on his bed, taking several deep breaths. Though he was exhausted, he was nervous about falling asleep, knowing the likelihood of him having nightmares about what had happened to him was pretty high. Will came back into their room from brushing his teeth in the bathroom and sat down next to Chris.

"Nervous?" asked Will. Chris nodded at him. "I was too the first nights after the Upside Down. And really, I still get nervous from time-to-time. But I'm gonna be here all night, okay?"

"I know," Chris whispered. "I'm really glad you'll be here."

Will smiled warmly at Chris.

"If you have any bad dreams, wake me up and we'll talk about it, okay? And don't feel bad about waking me up. I just want you to feel safe, Chris."

"Thanks, Will."

"You never have to thank me for that. We're family, this is what we do for each other. Now, please, just try and get some rest, okay? I'm sure you're exhausted after staying up all night and all day with that coward. Good night, Chris."

"Good night, Will."

"Help! Someone help me please!"

Though Chris couldn't see what was threatening to take him away, he could feel the presence of the beast. It was more of an entity than it was anything solid. But he knew it would steal him away and that he would have to fight like hell to get away from it.

"Will! Will!"

"I'm here, Chris," said a voice.

"Help me, please!"

"You're just having a bad dream, Chris. Wake up. Wake up, it's Will."

"Will!"

Chris shuddered as he felt an invisible pair of hands grasp his shoulder. He tried to fight over whatever it was, but the hands were determined to hold on to him.

"Will! Help!"

"Chris! Chris! Wake up! It's Will!"

Chris woke with a start, letting out the breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. He sat up in his bed as his vision came back into focus. Will was standing over him, holding onto his shoulders as if he had been trying to shake Chris awake.

"Hey," Will said in a weak voice and trying to give Chris a smile.

"Oh, Will!" Chris exclaimed as he burst into tears and wrapped his arms around Will's neck.

"Hey, hey, hey, it's okay, Chris," Will said in a soothing tone as he sat down on Chris' bed and pulled him close. "It's okay. I'm here."

Will rubbed circles on Chris' back as he spoke comforting words into Chris' ears. It took a few minutes to calm Chris down, but he finally stopped crying, his head still resting on Will's shoulder.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Chris.

"Hey, what'd I tell you, you don't need to apologize. It's okay, Chris. I expected you to have a bad dream. Talk to me about it."

"I don't know exactly what was going on, but it was like I was being taken away again by some invisible force," Chris explained. "I couldn't see who or what was taking me away, but I could feel

whatever it was trying hard. I tried to fight it, but the harder I fought, the more it seemed to want to take me. It scared me to death, Will. And then I felt hands on my shoulders and..."

At this, Chris stopped talking as he realized what he had felt.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Chris asked, lifting his head and looking Will in the eyes.

Will nodded.

"Yeah, that was me trying to wake you up," he said. "I'm sorry for scaring you, Chris."

"I think I just overreacted," Chris said. "Even though I could hear you speaking, it was like I couldn't believe that it was you, just like when I heard El speak to me."

"You heard her?" Will asked. "I thought I heard you talking about that earlier."

Chris nodded. "I could hear her telling me that someone was coming soon. I thought I was hearing things, but I couldn't help but say something, so I talked about the man who kidnapped me. When I didn't hear anything right away, I thought that meant for sure that I was just hearing things, but then I heard El say that it would be okay and to hold on a little longer. And that's when I found it in me to work to break free."

Chris took a deep breath as he finished his tale. Will kept his arms wrapped around Chris, hoping that his presence was enough.

"Are you okay now?" Will asked. Chris nodded. "Do you think you'll be able to go back to sleep."

"Um...I think so, but um..." Chris said, hesitating.

"Tell me," said Will with a nod.

"Could you stay here with me, at least until I fall asleep? I think it'll be easier if I know you're right here with me."

"Of course I'll stay here, Chris," said Will. "I'll keep a hold of your hand until I know for sure that you're asleep."

"Thank you, Will," Chris said as he lifted his head from Will's shoulder and lay back down on his pillow.

"Close your eyes," Will instructed. Chris did so and felt one of Will's hands grab on to one of his own. "Still your breathing, Chris. And relax. And know that you're safe. You're home with Mom, Jonathan and me. You're in our room and you're safe."

"I'm safe," Chris repeated. "I'm home and I'm safe."

"That's right," Will said. "Now rest, Chris. I'll be here all night with you. I promise."

"I love you, Will," Chris said as the sleepiness overwhelmed him. He could have sworn he felt something brush across his forehead, but he was too tired to know for sure.

"I love you, Chris. Goodnight."

10. PTSD

Chris woke with a start. He shook his head slightly to adjust to being conscious before he sat up, breathing heavily. He looked over at Will's bed and sighed with relief; he knew he must've not been talking in his sleep or thrashing about in his bed because Will was still fast asleep in his own bed. Chris kicked the blankets off of him and paused by Will's bed as he headed out the door. He bent down and patted Will on the head, trying his best not wake Will from his slumber.

Once outside the bedroom, Chris shut the door and walked into the kitchen. He tried not to make too much noise to avoid waking anyone else. He grabbed a glass from the pantry and filled it to the top with water. He sat down at the dining table and gulped about half of the water in the glass before setting it down.

Chris sighed deeply as he stared off into the distance, trying to remember which of his nightmares he had been having before he woke up. It was the one where Will was trying to stop him from getting kidnapped, but every time, Will failed and Chris was taken away from him again.

Chris was startled back into reality when he heard the chair next to him move. He looked up from his trance and saw Will sitting down next to him, a look of concern on his face. Chris immediately felt a pang of guilt.

"Still can't sleep?" Will asked gently, not sounding annoyed like Chris knew he had the right to be.

Chris shook his head, taking another gulp of water.

"You wanna talk about it?"

Chris sighed before he answered.

"I just wish the nightmares would stop, Will. They happen every night, sometimes two or three times. I'm just so sick of them, Will." Chris hesitated for a moment. "I'm sorry for waking you."

"How many times do I have to tell you, Chris: you don't have to apologize. I know you feel bad for waking up in the middle of the night, but it's not your fault."

"I know," Chris said, shaking his head slightly. "I'm just so sick of having the same dreams over and over again. I wish they would just stop and I could get a full night's rest without worrying about someone taking me again."

"Nobody will take you again," Will insisted, reaching across the table and grabbing onto Chris' hand. "Lonnie and that man are both in jail for what happened, and they can't get to you."

"I know, I know. I just wish my mind would remember that when I fall asleep."

Will nodded sympathetically.

"I still dream about the Upside Down, but when I wake up, I remember that you're with me and that helps. And that Mom is here. And Jonathan. And Mike and everyone else are close by, too."

"I know," Chris whispered. "I hope that as time goes on, I can stop dreaming about it every single night and get a break every now and then, you know?"

"I do," said Will, nodding again. "You should come back to bed, Chris, and try and get some rest. You need it. I don't want you falling asleep in class tomorrow."

"Ah, it's the end of the year, we're not learning that much," Chris said with a chuckle.

"That may be, but you still shouldn't fall asleep at school."

"Okay, Mom," Chris said, sounding exasperated. Will lightly smacked Chris' hand that he was holding before he pulled back and stood up.

"Come on, let's go try and get some sleep."

"All right," Chris said, taking the final gulp of water and setting the glass in the sink before following Will back to their room. Will lay

down on his bed and turned to Chris was he was on his bed.

"I'm here all night, just remember that," Will whispered.

"I know. You're here with me. I'll try and remember that."

"Try and get some sleep, okay?" Will said earnestly. "Promise me."

"I promise, Will. I'll do my best."

Hours later, Will slowly stirred as the sun came up. Chris noticed this and sighed quietly to himself. He had been unable to fall back asleep after his nightmare and had spent the night staring up at the ceiling, alternating between leaving his eyes opening and closing them, as if willing himself to fall asleep. He thought that he might have dozed off once or twice, but then he would be fully awake again, his thoughts stopping him from resting.

"Morning," Chris said when he saw that Will's eyes were open and that he was slowly sitting up.

"Hey," said Will tiredly. "Did you get any more rest?"

"A little," replied Chris. "I know I dozed off a couple of times, but then I would wake up again."

Will frowned at him.

"Are you okay?" he demanded.

"I'm fine," Chris replied, nodding. "I'll just be a little drowsy today, but I can sleep in study hall."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay home? I'm sure Mom wouldn't mind you taking a sick day to catch up on rest."

Chris shook his head.

"If I stay here by myself, I'll just sit here and go crazy, Will. I've gotta go to school. But I'll be fine, I promise."

Will sighed deeply before he nodded and threw his blankets off of himself and stood up to stretch. Chris got out of bed and started getting ready for the day while Will did the same. With half an hour, both of them were heading toward the kitchen, fully dressed. Jonathan was waiting for them, already cooking eggs and bacon for them.

"Morning, guys," Jonathan said happily as he scooped some eggs from the pan he was holding onto a plate that he offered Will. "Hope you both are hungry."

"Thanks, Jonathan," Will said cheerfully as he sat down at the table with his plate.

"Um, I'll just have some toast this morning, Jonathan. Not feeling too hungry this morning."

Jonathan frowned at Chris while Will looked up in concern. Chris was busying himself with putting two slices of bread into the toaster and didn't notice his soon-to-be brothers watching him until he turned around.

"Are you sure, buddy?" Jonathan asked. "We have plenty of food for everyone."

"I know," Chris said, nodding and smiling at Jonathan, though it looked forced to Will. "I'm okay, Jonathan, really. I'm just not hungry, is all. I'll just have some toast and I'll have a big lunch to make up for it later."

"If you say so," Jonathan said, turning back to the stove. "Let me know if you change your mind. I'm happy to make some eggs and bacon for you, too, Chris."

"I will, Jonathan, I promise," Chris said as the toaster released his two slices of toast. Chris took a napkin and used it to grab the toast before setting it on another napkin. He sat down next to Will and busied himself with adding some apple jelly to the toast. Will watched him closely and opened his mouth to insist that Chris eat something a little more fulfilling, but he knew that he couldn't change Chris' mind, and simply continued eating his eggs.

Will led Chris toward their history class that they shared with Mike. It was the final class period before lunch and Chris was glad; the toast had worn off a long time ago and he was looking forward to a good meal as soon as this class was done. Will walked into the classroom first and started to walk toward their seats where Mike was waiting.

Chris stopped in the doorway of the classroom, suddenly feeling lightheaded and dizzy. He gripped onto the door frame for support, trying to balance himself as best as he could. Will turned around when he realized Chris wasn't following him and hurried back to the door.

"You okay?" Will demanded.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Just need to catch my breath."

Will nodded, not looking convinced, as he started to walk back to Mike. Chris took several deep breaths, feeling his mind clear a little. He shook his head and took two steps forward.

Boom.

That's all Will heard when Chris collapsed to the ground. Will whipped around, his backpack falling off his shoulder. Will's eyes widened when he saw Chris on the ground with his eyes closed. Forgetting everything else, Will shouted Chris' name and ran over to him. He bent down next to Chris and started to shake him.

In what Will knew was only seconds but felt like an eternity, Mike appeared next to him as Will cradled Chris.

"What happened?" Mike asked.

"I don't know!" Will shouted back. "He just fell to the ground and he won't wake up!"

Mike nodded and Will held onto Chris for dear life, tears streaming down his face, and he gently shook Chris, trying to get him to wake up. Mike turned to the teacher, who had watched all of this, dumbfounded.

"Call someone!" Mike yelled. "Hurry!"

Chris felt his eyes twitch as he regained consciousness. He had no idea where he was, but he knew he was comfortable. He was lying in bed and he could feel a blanket covering the lower half of his body. He was also aware that both of his hands were being held. Chris opened his eyes slowly.

It took a second for his eyes to adjust to the brightness of the room, but once they did, he could see Joyce, Jonathan and Will surrounding him, all of them looking visibly relieved.

"Mama Joyce?" he asked, employing the name he called Joyce since she was going to adopt him soon.

"Yeah, baby, I'm here," Joyce said in a shaky voice. She bent down and gave Chris a kiss on the forehead. "We're all here, baby."

"Hi, buddy," Jonathan said weakly, giving Chris a small smile.

"Hi," Chris replied before he turned his head to look at Will, who was standing opposite Joyce and Jonathan over Chris. It was clear to Chris that Will had been crying; his eyes were red and there were dried tears on his cheeks.

"Are you okay?" Chris asked softly.

Will breathed deeply as if his voice had disappeared. After a few seconds, his facial expression calmed and he nodded.

"I'm just glad you're awake," Will said quietly.

"What happened?" Chris asked, turning back to Joyce and Jonathan, who exchanged a look.

"You passed out at school, honey. You were walking into your history class with Will when you collapsed. The doctor said it was from low blood pressure."

"Oh my goodness," Chris whispered.

"But it's okay," Joyce said hurriedly, seeing that Chris was feeling upset. "Will rushed over to you right away and Mike, too. He's outside, waiting to see you, if you want. But Mike yelled for your teacher to call someone and they were able to get out of the classroom and here safely."

"Am I...am I gonna be okay?"

"Yes, sweetie," Joyce said sweetly. "You just have to remember to eat something more than toast in the morning, Chris."

Chris turned his face away in shame, the guilt consuming him.

"That's not all," Will said slowly.

Chris' eyes shot up to Will, who was staring at him with a determined look in his eyes. Chris tried to shake his head to get Will to not say anything else, but Will shook his head slowly.

"You need to tell Mom, Chris," Will said. "It's the only way to make sure you start getting better."

"Tell me what, Chris?" Joyce asked, sounding concerned.

Chris shook his head.

"No, I can't," he said.

"Chris, it's okay. You can tell me anything, you know that, honey!"

"Please, I don't want to be a burden!"

"Oh, Chris, you are not a burden! You are family, Chris!"

Chris started to breathe heavily as the tears threatened to overwhelm him.

"I keep having dreams about it," he said before he dissolved into sobs. Joyce didn't need any more words; she knew exactly what he was talking about. She bent down to hug Chris as he broke down completely. Jonathan and Will hugged him too.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry," Chris choked out as he cried. "You shouldn't have to worry about me like this. I'm such a burden on you!"

"No, Chris, honey, shhh," Joyce said soothingly. "It's okay, Chris. It's okay."

Chris continued sobbing at Joyce held him and Jonathan and Will patted his back. Within a few minutes, Chris could feel the exhaustion overwhelming his body and before he could stop it, he had fallen asleep again.

"Will?" Chris whispered as he woke up again. He had no clue how long it had been since he passed out while hugging Joyce, but he knew that it had been several hours. He felt more rested than he had in weeks.

"Hey, buddy," said a familiar voice from his right.

Chris turned his head to the source of the voice.

"Mike!" he exclaimed.

"Hey, Chris," Mike said with a smile as he scooted closer in the chair he was sitting in and sat right next to Chris' bed. "I'm really glad to see you're awake."

"Where's everyone else?"

"Mrs. Byers took the boys to go and get something to eat. She asked me to stay here in case you woke up."

"How long have you been here?"

"I've been here ever since the ambulance came to school. I rode with Will to the hospital with you. I'm really glad you're awake now."

"You've been here all day?" Chris asked, the guilt consuming him once again. "Oh, Mikey, I'm sorry."

"Hey, you have nothing to be sorry for," Mike said, giving Chris a

warm smile and reaching over and grabbing one of Chris' hands.

Chris sighed.

"If you say so," he said absentmindedly.

"How are you feeling, though, Chris?"

Chris shrugged. "Better now that I've had some sleep, I guess. But I still feel bad."

"Why?"

"Because you've had to stay here all day. Because I freaked out Mama Joyce, Will, Jonathan and you. Because I'm such a burden!"

"Hey, hey," Mike said, squeezing Chris' hand gently, which seemed to calm Chris down a bit. "You are not a burden, Chris. Why would you think that?"

"Because I am, Mike!" Chris exclaimed as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"How?"

Chris sighed deeply.

"Because, you all keep having to worry about me when you shouldn't have to," he said in a small voice. "You all went through so much crap with the Upside Down and the Mindflayer and all that. You all have your own things to worry about without having to worry about me, too."

"Oh, Chris," Mike said as he lightly rubbed Chris' hand. Chris appreciated the gesture and could feel his body warming up at Mike's touch. "You shouldn't compare what happened with us to what happened to you. You getting kidnapped was every bit as scary as us fighting Demogorgans and the Mindflayer."

"Is it, though?" Chris challenged, not convinced by Mike's words, though they were starting to have an effect on him. "You all had monsters and demons from another dimension trying to kill you. I

just had a guy with a gun on me."

"That might be true, but your life was still threatened, Chris."

Chris scoffed and Mike took a breath before he continued talking.

"Look, when that man had his gun pointed at you and you were tied up to the bed, did you think you were gonna die?"

"What does that have to do-?"

"Answer the question, Chris," Mike said firmly. "Did you think you were gonna die when you were with that man?"

Chris simply stared back at Mike, who looked as if he already knew the answer that Chris was going to give. Finally, Chris nodded.

"Yeah. I thought there was a pretty good chance I was gonna die until I heard El tell me help was on the way and I started to free myself."

Mike nodded.

"And that's how we all felt when we were fighting the Demogorgans and trying to get the Mindflyer out of Will," he said. "I thought we were going to die. I was afraid, so afraid that at the very least, I was gonna lose Will. I couldn't have gone on living if I had, Chris."

Mike wiped away a tear as he continued talking.

"There was a good chance any one of us could have died when all that was happening, Chris, but we didn't. And you didn't, either, Chris. You survived what that man did to you, despite your life being in danger. You're one of the bravest people I know, Chris. I'm lucky to call you my friend and Will, Jonathan and Mrs. Byers are lucky to call you family. And we're lucky to have you in The Party."

Chris nodded slowly at this.

"So you see, even though we went through different things, it affects us the same," Mike continued. "You still have dreams about being kidnapped, and we all still have dreams about the Upside Down and the Mindflyer. I do, and I know Will does, too. We all have to be

there for each other, Chris. We all went through some bad stuff and even though it's different, it's the same, really."

Chris took several shaky breaths as he squeezed Mike's hand to show that he heard him.

"Thank you, Mike," he whispered.

"You don't have to thank me, Chris. I'm your friend, this is what friends do. And I want you to remember it's okay for you to feel like you're not safe, even though you are. I still do from time-to-time and I know Will does, too. What's not okay is pretending that everything is okay and shutting out everyone else. You can't do that to yourself, Chris. You deserve to feel like you can talk about this, all right?"

Chris nodded quickly as he leaned closer to Mike and pulled him into a hug.

"I will, Mikey," he said breathlessly. "I'll talk to you all about it. I promise."

"Good," Mike said happily and he held Chris tightly. "I just want you to be okay, Chris, and I know everyone else does, too."

"Thank you for talking to me," Chris said as he broke the hug. "I needed to hear all of that, especially from you. I've always known that I can always trust what you say, Mike."

"Of course you can, Chris. We're friends for life, you and me. You're like family to me."

"And you're really family to us," came another voice from behind Mike. Mike whipped around and smiled as the rest of the Byers family filed into the room, all of them looking more relieved than they did earlier.

"I'm sorry for scaring you all," Chris said as Joyce bent down to hug him again.

"Chris, you don't have to..."

"No, I know, but I want to," Chris interrupted. "I'm sorry for scaring

all of you, and I'm sorry for not telling you that I'm not okay. I don't want to have to deal with what happened to me by myself anymore."

"And you won't have to, Chris," Joyce said. "We're gonna be with you, no matter what."

"Yeah, you can always talk to us," added Jonathan.

"Or anyone in The Party," said Mike with a smile. "We have to take care of each other, Chris. That's party rule number one."

Chris chuckled as he locked eyes with Will. Chris pulled Will in for a hug and held him tightly.

"Together forever," he whispered into Will's ear.

"Yeah, Chris," Will whispered back. "Together forever."

"I love you, Will."

"I love you too, Chris. We'll always be there for each other, no matter what."

"Always," Chris echoed.